Ontological Security in Indonesia's Foreign Policy Formulation

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Abstract. This article explores the significance of ontological security in shaping Indonesia's foreign policy formulation. Moving beyond material conceptions of security focused on military, economic, and territorial dimensions it argues that Indonesia's foreign behavior is deeply influenced by the need to maintain a stable sense of national identity and historical continuity. As the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy and a leading Southeast Asian nation, Indonesia consistently projects itself through identity-based narratives rooted in anti-colonialism and the *"free and active"* foreign policy doctrine. Its unwavering support for Palestinian independence, participation in the Non-Aligned Movement, and regional leadership in ASEAN illustrate how ontological security underpins diplomatic consistency and domestic legitimacy. However, the same identity-driven approach can also create friction between ideological commitments and pragmatic interests, particularly in managing relations with major powers such as China and the United States. The study concludes that while ontological security provides coherence and credibility, it also demands adaptive strategies. It recommends identity-sensitive diplomacy, coherent narrative management, strategic flexibility, and inclusive public engagement to ensure that Indonesia's foreign policy remains balanced between identity preservation and practical global engagement.

Keywords: ontological security; Indonesian foreign policy; national identity; diplomacy; free and active doctrine.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the study of international relations, security has often been defined in material terms emphasizing military strength, economic resources, and territorial sovereignty (Walt, 1991; Buzan, 1991; Baldwin, 1997). Yet, contemporary scholarship has increasingly argued that security cannot be reduced to physical survival alone. States, like individuals, also seek ontological security a stable sense of identity and continuity across time (Giddens, 1991; Mitzen, 2006). This concept explains why states may act in ways that appear irrational from a material perspective, but are deeply rational when viewed through the lens of identity preservation.

Indonesia provides a compelling case study. As the world's largest archipelagic state, the most populous Muslim-majority country, and a democracy in Southeast Asia, Indonesia's foreign policy is not merely guided by pragmatic concerns but also by the imperative of maintaining its self-identity (Sukma, 2011). Its historical narrative of anti-colonialism, its doctrine of "free and active" foreign policy, and its consistent advocacy for Palestinian independence illustrate the centrality of ontological security in shaping its external behavior (Anwar, 2010).

Aim

This paper aims to:

Explain the meaning of ontological security and how it manifests in foreign policy formulation.

Examine the impact of ontological security on Indonesia's state behavior and decision-making.

Provide strategic recommendations for Indonesian policymakers to address ontological security concerns in a rapidly changing global environment.

Issue

The central issue lies in the frequent neglect of ontological dimensions in analyzing Indonesian foreign policy. Much scholarly attention remains focused on material interests such as economic growth, investment, and security alliances, while the psychological need for a stable state identity often remains overlooked. Padahal, konsep ontological security menunjukkan bahwa negara tidak hanya mengejar kepentingan material, tetapi juga berupaya mempertahankan kontinuitas narasi identitas untuk menciptakan perasaan konsistensi diri (Mitzen, 2006). Dalam konteks Indonesia, pembentukan identitas sebagai negara demokratis, moderat, dan pemimpin kawasan turut mendorong kebijakan luar negeri yang tidak selalu dapat dijelaskan secara material (Subianto, 2020). Hal ini sejalan dengan pandangan bahwa tindakan luar negeri kerap merupakan upaya negara untuk merasa "utuh" secara identitas (Steele, 2008). Beberapa peneliti juga menegaskan bahwa dinamika politik domestik dan memori sejarah berkontribusi terhadap mode aksi diplomatik Indonesia di panggung global (Acharya, 2014; Karim, 2019). Dengan demikian, analisis kebijakan luar negeri Indonesia perlu mengintegrasikan dimensi ontologis selain pertimbangan material untuk memperoleh pemahaman yang lebih komprehensif. However, Indonesia often makes foreign policy decisions that cannot be fully explained through material cost-benefit calculations (Wirawan, 2020).

For example, Indonesia's unwavering support for Palestine, despite limited direct material benefits, underscores the weight of identity-based considerations. Similarly, its consistent emphasis on sovereignty and anti-colonial values reflects a desire to preserve historical narratives central to its national identity (Suryadinata, 2017). The challenge, however, is that ontological security sometimes creates tensions between identity-driven policies and pragmatic needs, particularly in balancing economic partnerships with great powers such as China and the United States.

2. ANALYSIS

Manifestations of Ontological Security in Indonesia's Foreign Policy.

Ontological security manifests in Indonesian policy formulation through several interrelated dimensions:

Historical and ideological narratives

Since independence in 1945, Indonesia has cultivated a self-image as a nation that rejects colonial domination and upholds sovereignty. This legacy continues to shape foreign policy, as seen in Indonesia's leadership role in the Bandung Conference of 1955 and its foundational role in the Non-Aligned Movement (Anwar, 2010). The principle of a "free and active" (bebas-aktif) foreign policy serves as an ontological anchor, ensuring consistency in external behavior.

Identity roles in the international system

Indonesia projects itself as a moderate Muslim-majority democracy, a voice for the Global South, and a regional leader in Southeast Asia. This identity has guided its diplomacy in ASEAN, its peacekeeping contributions to the UN, and its mediation roles in regional conflicts such as Aceh, Mindanao, and Myanmar (Sukma, 2011).

Consistency of values in diplomacy

The Palestinian issue is perhaps the clearest example of ontological security in practice. Indonesia's refusal to recognize Israel, despite potential economic or technological benefits, demonstrates how identity preservation can outweigh material calculations (Wirawan, 2020). This stance reinforces Indonesia's historical self-identity as an anti-colonial and pro-justice actor.

Impact of Ontological Security on Indonesia's Behavior and Decisions

Ontological security influences Indonesia's external behavior in several important ways:

Prioritization of symbolic diplomacy

Indonesia often undertakes initiatives designed not only for material gain but also to strengthen its identity as a credible global actor. Hosting the G20 Summit in 2022, for instance, was not merely about economic benefits but about reinforcing Indonesia's role as a bridge between developed and developing nations (Suryadinata, 2017).

Consistency in international positions

Indonesia's foreign policy demonstrates strong continuity across administrations, particularly regarding principles of sovereignty and justice. Its long-standing refusal to normalize relations with Israel highlights how ontological considerations sustain policy consistency despite changing global contexts (Anwar, 2010).

Domestic legitimacy reinforcement

Ontological security concerns also resonate domestically. Policies aligned with historical identity narratives such as support for Palestine—enhance government legitimacy at home by appealing to collective memory and national values (Wirawan, 2020).

Challenges in Balancing Ontological and Material Security

While ontological security provides coherence, it also generates challenges:

Identity-material conflict

Tensions arise when historical identity commitments clash with economic pragmatism. For instance, while Indonesia emphasizes sovereignty and non-interference, its growing economic reliance on China complicates its ability to address regional disputes in the South China Sea (Sukma, 2011).

Risk of diplomatic rigidity

Strong adherence to ontological narratives may reduce flexibility in adapting to global shifts. Overemphasis on historical legacies could constrain Indonesia from innovating its foreign policy responses to new challenges such as climate change and digital geopolitics (Steele, 2008).

Managing multiple role identities

Indonesia's simultaneous roles as ASEAN leader, Muslim-majority democracy, and Global South advocate may at times produce conflicting expectations, requiring careful narrative balancing (Mitzen, 2006).

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

To manage ontological security effectively while safeguarding pragmatic interests, Indonesian policymakers should consider the following strategies:

Identity sensitive diplomacy

Indonesian diplomacy should continue to emphasize cultural and historical identity, particularly within ASEAN and the Muslim world, while engaging constructively with global powers (Anwar, 2010). This will preserve its ontological foundation while avoiding isolation.

Narrative management

The government should actively construct and communicate coherent foreign policy narratives that balance historical commitments with emerging global priorities such as climate resilience, digital transformation, and sustainable development (Suryadinata, 2017).

Strategic role adaptation

Indonesia should maintain flexibility in its international role conception. While upholding bebas-aktif, it should strategically adapt by deepening selective partnerships with major powers to advance national interests without undermining identity commitments (Sukma, 2011).

Public engagement in diplomacy

To strengthen legitimacy, Indonesia should expand public diplomacy initiatives that involve civil society, academia, and media in shaping and disseminating identity-based narratives (Wirawan, 2020). This will ensure that foreign policy remains aligned with the nation's collective self-identity.

4. CONCLUSION

Ontological security provides an essential framework for understanding Indonesia's foreign policy formulation. Beyond material calculations of power and interest, Indonesia is motivated by the need to preserve its identity, maintain narrative consistency, and uphold its historical self-image (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008).

Indonesia's foreign policy illustrates how identity concerns shape behavior: from its leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement and its role in ASEAN, to its unwavering support for Palestine and its pursuit of symbolic diplomacy through global summits (Anwar, 2010; Sukma, 2011). These actions reflect not only pragmatic choices but also the deeper imperative of ontological security.

However, overreliance on identity preservation can create challenges, including conflicts between ontological and material needs, diplomatic rigidity, and tensions between multiple role identities (Wirawan, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires strategies that combine respect for historical narratives with adaptive pragmatism.

For Indonesia, recognizing and managing ontological security concerns is not merely theoretical but essential for crafting sustainable, coherent, and credible foreign policies in an era of global uncertainty.

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